

Strategic Plan Analysis: Maryland State Library Resource Center (SLRC)

Brief summary

The Maryland State Library Resource Center (SLRC), established in 1971 as a public library institution, serves as the State Library for Maryland, working to provide services and resources for Maryland libraries and their patrons (“Homepage”; “About SLRC”; “Organization”; “Statement of Compliance With Section 508 Accessibility Standards”). Housed at the central branch of the Enoch Pratt Free Library (EPFL) in downtown Baltimore, it is funded through a grant which is part of the state of Maryland’s budget, serving a variety of libraries throughout the state, whether public, academic, school, or special (“State Library Resource Center (SLRC)”; “About SLRC”; “BFRA includes flat budget for libraries through 2016”; “Governor Releases FY12 State Budget”; “R01A1101 – Maryland State Library Agency”; “Libraries receive flat funding from state for FY 2012”; “O’Malley releases FY 11 budget for Maryland”; “Central Library”). The SLRC is tasked with maintaining a collection of objects, books, and other resources dating from the 1100s to the present, has subject specialists among their staff, and operates the SAILOR, “Maryland’s on-line electronic information network” (“Organization”; “About SLRC”; “Exploring Daily Life Throughout History”: “Public Collections”; “State Publications Depository & Distribution Program”). Apart from conducting annual conferences for Maryland librarians every year, it offers training on varied topics, and supports the Library Associate Training Institute (LATI), administered by Maryland State Department of Education (“About SLRC”; “Resources for State Librarians”; “Professional Development for Librarians in Maryland”). It also consults with Maryland libraries, coordinates

statewide interlibrary loans through the MARINA system (which SLRC operates), prominently used by EPFL system, provides subscriptions to research databases for public libraries within the state, and produces guides displaying librarian-recommended websites (“Depository Libraries”; “About SLRC”; “Services Available to Everyone”; “R01A1101 – Maryland State Library Agency”; “Maryland's State Library Resource Center”). In order to ensure completion of these tasks, the SLRC reports to the Maryland State Department of Education and SLRC Commission, sets a strategic plan every five years, and outlines an annual plan every year based on the existing strategic plan (“Governance, Plans, & Reports”; “About SLRC”). This connects to the explanation in the Lord and Markert reading that strategic plans are proposed every three to five years, with this plan falling into the latter category (Lord and Markert 2017, p. 31). While no information was found on the size of this institution, it is estimated that it is a small institution since it is housed within only one EPFL branch. The strategic plan analyzed in this document was published on May 1, 2017, but is currently used by the institution (“State Library Resource Center Strategic Plan: FY2018 to FY2021”). Clearly, it is not a form of crisis management, as talked about by Lord and Markert, in their writing on the subject, and was put forward to clearly guide development of this unique library institution.

Analyzing stated core purpose, core values, and vision

The SLRC has a clearly stated core purpose, core values, and vision. The core purpose of the library is simple: to collaborate with partners to provide “cooperative, cost effective, statewide resources and services for Maryland libraries and their customers.” However, this is very broad and lacks detail on meaning of words such as “cooperative,” “cost effective,” and

“services.” It is not known what services are referred to, what cooperation would look like or what would be considered “cost-effective.” Even the term “statewide resources” is vague, as it is not said what these resources currently include or what they will include in the future. The core values say that the library is dedicated to “accountability,” “collaboration,” “equity of access,” “excellent customer service,” “expertise,” “integrity,” “neutrality,” “open communication,” and “truth.” While these are desirable ideals for a library, all of these words can be defined differently without a uniform definition. Similarly, the vision is broad, stating the library “delivers relevant, high quality, innovative, and cost effective services to all Maryland libraries.” This is undoubtedly a worthwhile set of ideals for a library. Without definitions of these terms, such vagueness can lead to problems in the future. Having written a vision statement of my own in the previous assignment for this class, I find this statement is acceptable but definitely needs improvement. Even so, the mission (called a vision here) is clearly outlined, setting the stage for how the institution will meet best practices and standards, ensuring that all of the operations of the institution will be integrated and focused in a forward-looking direction.

There are some good signs for their core purpose, core values, and vision, however. The library’s assumptions for the future, written in March 2017, state that the organization must anticipate strategic factors which will affect its ability to succeed. This means that it will constantly recalibrate its view of the future going forward, which will be used to update the strategic plan in later years. In addition, there is a section about a “long-term envisioned future,” setting out a broad idea for the organization in the next 10+ years, envisioning a concrete but not yet realized organizational vision in the future. This new vision will be, as the plan states, a

“clear and compelling catalyst” serving as a “focal point for effort,” including a vivid, vibrant, and engaging description. Such sections make the core purpose and core values seem stronger, but they do not solve the problems of vagueness with the three previously mentioned elements of the strategic plan (core values, core purpose, and vision). By the end, there is still a lack of necessary details, such as how institutional planning will materialize over the ten year period, how resources will be allocated, institutional culture, strengths and weaknesses, telling the library’s story, or simply stating the library is needed at all, the most important section.

On the same page the vision is stated, there is another section, which outlines a “vivid description of a desired future.” It states that the SLRC is the state of Maryland’s top source for reliable, accessible, and credible library services available to all sorts of libraries in the state, allowing Marylanders to have access to information to fulfill their needs and gain a high level of information literacy. The section then says that since the institution is committed to “life-long learning,” the staff extrapolate from their interactions with partners and patrons in order to deliver and design services which address current needs of their collection. Connected to this institutional commitment, the library staff, which are described as “experts in their field,” deliver products and a level of instruction based on the specific needs of each library within the state of Maryland. Furthermore, the strategic plan states that the leadership of the library embraces a culture of continuously evaluating new services and resources, while letting go of those which are seen as irrelevant. This section also states that the SLRC offers training and wide array of services scaled and appropriate to individual library systems across the state, while following best practices. In order to ensure these assertions are realized, this state library institution ensures

that the best resources are available on a local basis. This is manifested by guaranteeing that databases are either free or at low cost, and offering free access to their collections, part of a belief that communities are improved by having free internet for all. The section ends by stating that the SLRC advocates for elimination of barriers by providing access to multiple “special traveling cultural exhibits” and by sharing (or buying) databases which cannot be afforded by individual communities on their own.

The “vivid description of the future” section almost makes up for the vagueness in the core purpose, core values, and vision, all of which are lacking necessary specificity. Still, the broad principles are not supported by examples, an effective means to assert their argument to those reading the strategic plan. Even so, this section of the strategic plan fulfills the Laura Saunders’s observations about strategic plans: that libraries take a risk of going into new areas because those areas could be a leadership opportunity for the library itself (Saunders 290). As such, this strategic plan serves not only as a tactical planning document but a marketing tool to help communicate the role of the institution, raising its profile.

Analyzing goals and objectives

The goals and objectives of the SLRC seem to be reasonable, not too big nor too small, covering a three to five year time period. After defining what goals and objectives represent generally and for the organization, a priority key is outlined. This key states that those objectives which are coded as “I” must begin the next fiscal year, those coded as “M” may begin the next fiscal year if resources permit it, and those coded as “L” are required to begin in a subsequent fiscal year. This is a strong sign of the goals to come, framing them as innovative and forward-

looking, not stuck in the past. But, looking at the goals themselves is the only sure way of proving whether this perception is correct or faulty.

For this section of the strategic plan, there are three categories: “awareness,” “digital inclusion” and “staff development and training.” Under each of these headings are specific goals and a range of objectives. The first goal is simple: ensuring that all libraries in the state of Maryland are aware of the services and resources of the SLRC. In order to accomplish this, there are three objectives. Firstly, immediately expanding awareness of the SLRC by Maryland library staff at all levels. It is followed by aiming to, either in the coming fiscal year or afterwards, expand awareness of their institution by libraries of all types, specifically school libraries. Finally, expanding geographic awareness by emphasizing urban, rural, and suburban areas, is the last objective, farthest from execution. Reading this goal, and the subsequent objectives related to its completion, it is undoubtedly clear, workable and reasonable. The hardest objective may be expanding awareness of library staff across the state, because some may not be as enthusiastic about their jobs or maybe be in their positions for a short period of time, especially those in the 18-25 age range. As such, it might be challenging to reach this demographic. Otherwise, the objectives can be completed. The main issue with the other two objectives will be how individuals are made aware of the SLRC. Ensuring that there is an ongoing and healthy relationship between the SLRC and other library systems across the state, emphasizing that library systems across the state are partners with each other, will help to reinforce this awareness and meet information needs of state residents.

The next goal is much broader. It is ensuring that Maryland libraries, through the SLRC, will be able to access technology and digital resources to achieve digital equity across the state. In order to achieve this goal, there are five objectives. The most immediate is enhancing and improving high-speed internet access across the state, specifically to rural or otherwise disenfranchised areas, with the strategic plan describing these areas as “underserved.” This would be coupled with increasing awareness and maintaining support of local digitization efforts within the state currently exhibited by the Digital Maryland program (“About”). Of next importance is assisting local staff through enhancing opportunities for training so they can further become digitally literate within their communities, and improving local bandwidth capacity within the state while assisting technical staff with promotion of strategic solutions. The objective of lowest importance is ensuring that use of emerging technologies is improved in order to deliver services to libraries in specific areas. The goal is very expansive and will be much tougher to accomplish than the previous goal of increasing awareness of the SLRC. Additionally, in the process of trying to improve high-speed internet and local bandwidth capacity across the state, it is clear that there will be conflict with those institutions which make a profit from these services and have no incentive to provide the same level of services for those in suburban, urban, and rural areas. Overcoming this disparity may require public advocacy not mentioned in the goals of this strategic plan, which seems to be an unfortunate oversight of the reality of the current political landscape. Additionally, these goals are broad in scope, especially the one about staff training, and with no examples given, it will be harder to assess if these goals have been completed by the time the next strategic plan is formulated five years from now. As

such, while the goal is a laudable one, the objectives could benefit from improvement, including addition of specifics in order to make sure that the objectives can be accomplished in the necessary timeframe and reinforce the SLRC's current funding from the State of Maryland.

There is one final goal: to ensure that Maryland library employees and personnel are able to better provide service of a high quality to their respective library patrons by using development training opportunities proposed by the SLRC. The most immediate objective is to enhance relevance specific training session topics. The next in order of importance is to expand options of training delivery. The last is to increase the number of libraries which are served by the SLRC, specifically emphasizing rural libraries, as they are part of an underserved area, to recall an earlier part of the strategic plan. This objective and interrelated goals are altogether possible. However, in the writing of this section, some of the language used is only accessible to those in human resources (HR). This is evidenced by using terms like "training and development opportunities" and "training delivery," to give two examples. It could be that the report is written by and for those in HR primarily, so the tone of the report reflects this audience. But this could be easily remedied with different language, allowing for more accessibility.

Final thoughts

SLRC's strategic plan includes a core purpose, core values, vision, goals, and objectives, but lacks an analysis phase or period looking at outcomes. If that section was present in the plan, it would be possible to examine it, but since it not available, discussion of it is completely moot. With that addressed, I have some final comments on this strategic plan. While there are clear shortcomings, like no mention of marketing or how the institution will be promoted outside the

library community, this plan is proactive because it looks 10+ years in the future and envisions working with other institutions to accomplish their goals, coupled with continuous improvement of the institution itself. It is also innovative because it guesses possible future changes which haven't occurred, and serves as an effective managerial tool, allowing the library staff to provide ideas for new initiatives. As such, the plan fulfills what Anne Marie Casey wrote in her article: that a strategic plan is one of the ways to get staff input, carries on forward momentum, and fosters generative and organizational thinking which best uses strategic resources (Casey 329, 331-332, 336, 338, 339). At the same time, the plan also provides workable (and flexible) guidelines for moving into a future, which is obviously uncertain, creating clear distinctive value, effectively enabling managers to transform the library's process and organization. This echoes which Barbara B. Moran, Robert B. Studart, and Claudia Morner write on the topic (Moran, Studart, and Morner 71-91). With that, I end my analysis of the SLRC's strategic plan.

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